

Robert A Sobieszek, art historian

Reminders, lurking quietly in the dark

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The need to collect, classify, and understand nature through its artifacts started in the late 17th century. Through such study, ideal models of nature became the standard against which any aberration or nonconformity could be measured. This was especially true within the human sciences. Normality and abnormality, sanity and insanity, health and disease, species and hybrids, purity and impurity—these were the opposites that guided us in our attempts to understand and catalog human nature. It is within this historical context that deviations from the norm were considered “freaks” or “monsters.”

Reminders, like fears, often lurk quietly in the dark, submerged both literally and metaphorically, waiting for the right time and the right audience before reappearing. Artifacts of medical science are a bit like reminders. Once analyzed and labeled, they frequently remain buried in the basements of museums, hospitals, and universities—lost to time and to the vagaries of fashion and an ever-changing cultural ethos—until they are rediscovered.

The figures so caringly and reverently photographed by Camille Solyagua are far more than mere curiosities of

embryonic misfortune. Preserved from an era in which witnessing death and photographing the deceased were commonplace, these images are both emblematic and moving. They are emblems of a faith that visualization yields information that language and mathematics could not hope to provide. They also move us to consider, if not reconsider, what it is to be human, healthy, and alive. Painfully, these images remind us, in the words of the science historian Georges Canguilhem, that the “abnormal is not what is not normal, but what constitutes another normal.”¹

Robert A Sobieszek is an art historian with graduate degrees from Stanford University and Columbia University. He specializes in the history of photography and has organized more than 30 exhibitions and authored 8 books on the subject.

Reference

- 1 Canguilhem G. *The Normal and the Pathological*. Fawcett CR, Cohen RS, trans. New York: Zone Books; 1989:203.

